

March 2, 2011

To the House Appropriations Committee,

I am submitting this written testimony concerning The Governor's Bill #1012, splitting The Board of Education and Services for the Blind between the Department of Social Services and the Department of Education.

On paper, the plan appears to be a cost effective idea, saving approximately \$500,000.00 in management salaries. The elimination of these salaries by combining BESB with the DOE and DSS seems logical only to someone who does not work in the specialized field providing services to the blind and visually impaired residents of Connecticut. They depend on our agency as a whole for their needs. These clients deserve a centralized agency that will provide complete services. Explain to the clients of BESB why they can no longer depend on one centralized agency for their services. There are currently more than 11,000 residents of Connecticut registered with BESB. Out of those 11,000 residents, over 3,000 are actively receiving our services. These clients receive BESB's services from the time they are diagnosed, until their death. If BESB is split between two separate agencies, the blind community will not receive the same level of service they have in the past. BESB is the oldest agency in the United States, beginning in 1893. All divisions continuously communicate with each other to provide the best possible service to the clients. A call is received and is immediately transferred to the appropriate division. Whether it is a parent of a child, a newly diagnosed forty year old trying to retain their job or an elderly gentleman trying to deal with losing his sight, they have one place to go, BESB.

This agency is a place where a blind or visually impaired individual has Teachers of the Visually Impaired, Mobility Instructors, Social Workers, Rehabilitation Teachers, Rehabilitation Counselors, Technologists specializing in adaptive equipment and software, Business Enterprise Representatives to assist setting up businesses, a Braille Unit to procure or produce materials for school age clients, and a lending library containing Braille and large print textbooks for students in kindergarten through 12th grade. .

Yes, it has been said that the services will remain the same. How could they if divisions are split? Yes, services may continue, but not to the high standards that BESB clients have been able to receive in the past. The ability of the staff to provide these services will be affected, negatively. Communication and continuity are extremely important when providing such specialized services to the blind community of Connecticut.

The overall description of BESB on paper does not even due justice to the agency. The lending library described contains over 59,000 volumes of Braille and large print books for the students that are BESB clients. When all books from the present school year are returned at the end of June, the library will contain over 62,000 volumes. It is 66' 6" long x 45' 10" deep containing 234 3'x1' shelves. The area contains a Braille Volunteer room with 6 computers for volunteers to use to transcribe Braille materials. It also houses 3 Braille embossers for producing Braille materials, a work area for the office

assistant, the office for the Braille coordinator, and storage area for supplies for producing Braille. In the 2009-2010 school year, the Braille Unit processed 1,687,000 large print and Braille book orders for our students to enable them to have the same classroom materials as their sighted peers. How can the agency provide this amount with limited space and less communication?

The Braille Unit Volunteer program consists of two in-house volunteers, several at-home typists and three programs at three separate Connecticut Correctional facilities. One program based at Cheshire Correctional consists of twenty-two certified Braille transcriptionists. These volunteers produced 198 Braille books saving the state almost \$160,000. The lending library provided BESB students with at least 350 books for the 2009-2010 school year. The Braille Unit purchases books for students in a cost effective manner. It also produces materials for those students, for Vocational Rehabilitation clients, for adult Services clients, for BEP clients, for towns and for other various state agencies. The agency split as proposed will take away from our ability to provide all of these things for our clients in a timely and efficient manner.

If BESB is split between two separate agencies, there are other costs to consider. The agency embosser that was purchased for \$40,000 will need to be moved and housed at either DSS or DOE. There will need to be an additional embosser purchased for the divisions that are housed in the second agency. This would cost \$50,000 today. Finding the space in the DOE to house 62,000 volumes of books. Yearly this number grows. A low vision center, a cafeteria with stoves, microwaves and other appliances to teach clients how to cook or do laundry when learning to be independent. These are just a few things to take into account.

There are many things to be considered when looking how cost effective this split will actually be. But again, what will the final cost be to the blind and visually impaired residents of Connecticut. How can you put a price on a human beings independence and success?

Respectfully yours,

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